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SUBJECT: SENIOR ISLAMIC FIGURES PRAISE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM COOPERATION, BUT SHOW DEEP MISTRUST OF ISRAEL AND JUDAISM

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Chief Justice of the Sharia Court and the Mufti of the Kingdom recently expressed to us their strong condemnation of Israeli violence in the West Bank and of suicide bombings, but asked that the U.S. adopt a "more just" position defending the rights of Palestinians against Israeli occupation. Both praised the piety and religious tolerance of Americans, noting that their offices spend much of their time dealing with the personal problems of expatriate Jordanians living in the West. Both emphasized Christian-Muslim understanding and cooperation in Jordan. Unfortunately, both also drew on Quranic verses and popular myths about Judaism to underscore their mistrust of Israel.
End summary.

YES TO PALESTINIANS, NO TO TERRORISM

¶2. (C) During recent separate meetings with PolCouns, the Chief Justice of the Sharia Court, Sheikh Izzeddine al-Tamimi, and the Mufti of the Kingdom, Sheikh Said al-Hijjawi, both flagged the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and recent "aggression" into Palestinian cities as the most important political issue facing their flock. Both Tamimi and Hijjawi asserted that Israel's use of U.S.-provided F-16's, Apache helicopters, and missiles have convinced average Jordanians and Muslims that the U.S. supports Israeli killing of Palestinians. Hijjawi argued that the U.S. must use the principles of religion to develop a "more just" policy that supports the rights of innocent Palestinians against Israeli occupation.

¶3. (C) Both were quick, however, to reject the killing of civilians in the name of Islam, quoting verses of the Quran which call for the protection of civilians in times of war. The Quran does not permit suicide bombings against innocent civilians, Tamimi argued, although he said that the U.S. and Israel must understand that the long Israeli occupation has convinced many Palestinians that they have no other way to oppose the occupation. Hijjawi strongly rejected the philosophy of Osama Bin Laden, saying that Bin Laden had hijacked the peaceful spirit of Islam and used it to implement his violent, hateful agenda. The West, and especially the U.S., should not mistake Bin Laden's misdeeds for the true Islam, which respects the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

ISLAM IN THE U.S.

4 (C) PolCouns explained that, despite the secular nature of the U.S. government, religious faith is an important and deeply rooted element in American society. Americans are free to worship in the way that they choose, and the vast majority of Americans also respect that others have the same right. It is this religious freedom and tolerance that have permitted Islam and other religions to flourish in the U.S.

¶5. (C) Both Tamimi and Hijjawi expressed admiration for the religious freedom enjoyed in the United States. Tamimi said that Jordanian Sharia courts deal extensively with Islamic centers in the United States to obtain or verify birth, death, marriage, and divorce records. He praised the professionalism of American Islamic Centers, noting that nearly all of these centers comment favorably on their close and cooperative relations with local American governmental authorities.

ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD

¶6. (C) The Chief Justice said that Jordanian Sharia courts deal largely with personal status issues (marriage, divorce, death, inheritance) for Muslim citizens. These issues have become more complicated as Jordanian Muslims have traveled abroad, and met and married people of other faiths in civil

ceremonies. In contrast, the Mufti explained that his office has a broad -- in fact, borderless -- mandate: to provide proper Islamic guidance to average citizens who have questions about how to deal with personal problems. Most questions -- the proper way to treat new relatives in a marriage or the need to maintain personal financial discipline -- are easy to link to the Quran and the hadith (the collected sayings of the Prophet Mohammed). However, the Mufti admitted, the researchers in his office spend a lot of time answering e-mailed questions from Jordanians living in the West about typically modern problems -- for example, what to do about incorrect credit card charges, regulating their children's viewing of cable or satellite television, and non-Muslim peer pressure on teenage Muslims to date and drink alcohol.

TOLERANT OF CHRISTIANITY, LESS SO OF JUDAISM

¶17. (C) Both Tamimi and Hijjawi emphasized the strong Jordanian tradition of tolerance and understanding between Muslims and Christians. Hijjawi commented that he and a prominent activist Eastern Catholic (Malkite) priest (who is well and favorably known to the Embassy) were "co-conspirators" on several projects to promote Muslim-Christian understanding. Tamimi, too, talked of the long-standing cooperation between Christians and Muslims, saying that the Christian sects who control Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher have entrusted the keys of the Church to a Muslim.

¶18. (C) Unfortunately, these positive feelings were not nearly as strong with regard to Judaism. Why is it that Jews demand a "Jewish state" in Jerusalem, Hijjawi asked, when there is no archeological proof that a Jewish temple ever existed under the Haram al-Sharif (the Muslim complex containing the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque on top of Temple Mount)? From there, Hijjawi wove a familiar web of suspicion of Israel based on half-truths and popular misconceptions. Tamimi, as well, criticized "Zionist extremists" for perpetuating the "Jewish occupation" of the West Bank and Gaza, and cited verses from the Quran advising that Muslims use great caution in dealing with Jews. PolCounts responded that Arabs and Muslims would have to deal with Jewish beliefs just as they asked Israel to deal with Islamic beliefs.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) Both Tamimi and Hijjawi are moderate, establishment Islamic figures who represent mainstream Jordanian Sunni thought. Both expressed admiration for the piety and freedom of Americans, are strong advocates for Muslim-Christian understanding in Jordan, and publicly condemned (and continue to condemn) the September 11 attacks as un-Islamic. Hijjawi recalled his experience leading a delegation of Muslim officials to pay respects to the Ambassador at the Embassy's condolence tent after the attacks.

¶110. (C) However, even while rejecting Bin Laden's message against Christians and Jews, both revealed in a matter of fact way their suspicion of Israel based both in Quranic passages critical of Jews and popular misconceptions of Judaism and Israel. This attitude on the part of the two most senior Islamic officials in Jordan gives some indication of how deep this current runs in Jordanian society.
Gnehm